BOOK REVIEWS

Making Sense of Mind Only: Why Yogācāra Buddhism Matters. By William S. Waldron. New York: Wisdom Publications, 2023. xix + 366 pages. Paperback. ISBN-13: 978-1-61429-726-0.

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The Yogācāra Buddhist tradition has been a small field of research for Western scholars since the mid-twentieth century, and Yogācāra has been taught in university classes in North America since at least the 1970s. Due to the lack of a solid and balanced introductory book for Yogācāra, up to now instructors of introductory courses who have needed course texts have been pretty much forced to patch together a variety of teaching materials according to their own abilities and interests. A number of our colleagues have, over the years, considered writing such a book, but given the breadth, sophistication, and complexity of the Yogācāra tradition, this was always seen to be an onerous task because it would require an immense effort to properly cover all of the broad aspects of Yogācāra. Now, however, the job has been done, and done well. William Waldron has, with great care, and working over the course of many years, come up with a masterpiece. The book not only serves well as an introduction but can also be a study for advanced scholars, as it assiduously guides us through the thorniest issues in the Yogācāra tradition.

The arguments and examples given in this book are many, but they are held together by a single thread: dependent arising. In a sense, Yogācāra can be described as nothing but a profound exercise in understanding and coming to terms with the pervasiveness of dependent arising. In my experience as a scholar of Buddhism, I have come across only one other book that treats dependent arising with this degree of intensity and insight.[1] But a philosophically oriented scholar who might think that this will make Waldron's volume easy to understand would have to be cautioned. What is being articulated here is not the simple image of *ontological* dependent arising of causal interconnectedness to which we tend to be conditioned: it is an *epistemological* articulation of dependent arising. We create our own worlds through our own thinking.

[1] Macy 1991. This book is not Yogācāra-oriented, but like Waldron's book, it has an extensive conversation with the opinions of scientists on mutual causality in scientific disciplines.

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Before delving into the specifics of the book, we should also point out an important aspect of the author's background. In addition to being a consummate scholar of Yogācāra, Waldron has, since at least his time in graduate school, been deeply involved in researching the findings of physicists, psychologists, cognitive scientists, neurologists, and so forth, regarding their most recent understandings of the epistemological construction of self and world. The author is able not only to borrow from, and make comparisions with, such theoretical frameworks but is also able to borrow from the language of such disciplines when trying to render difficult Yogācāra concepts into English. Nowadays, it is fairly common for scholars of Yogācāra to have some knowledge of the perspectives of natural scientists on the matter of causality and habit formation, but Waldron has for some time been a leading figure in this regard.

The book is arranged in two major parts, with part 1 being titled "Background and Context of Yogācāra," and part 2 simply "Yogācāra." Part 1 covers the epistemological philosophy of early Buddhism, cognitive processes of early Buddhism, Abhidharma, and early Mahayana. Buddhists gradually developed the notions of no-self, karma, dependent arising, emptiness, and the two truths during these periods. Part 2 covers the development of Yogācāra proper, starting with the reading of some passages from the *Saṃdhinirmocana Sutra*, and then some shorter, focused texts. The main topic of earlier sections of part 2 is the storehouse consciousness, the *ālayavijñāna*, accompanied by discussions of seeds (*bīja*), habit formation (*vāsanā*), "presentation" (*vijñapti*), and the three natures (*trisvabhāva*)—all of which swim within the epistemological mesh of dependent arising. One of the most critical arguments taken up is the explanation of why the assertion of the separate existence of self and other is actually a moot question from the perspective of properly understood dependent arising. The end of part 2—the most intellectually demanding section—leads us through the contemplation aimed at bringing forth the attainment of buddhahood. The second part of the book is peppered with comparisons with, and discussions of, relevant opinions from modern scientific fields.

Returning to part 1, in chapter 1, "Early Buddhism," the author elucidates the extent and ways in which causation is the central philosophical issue in Buddhism. The chapter starts with the origins of sufferings—the first of the four truths—but soon moves to the more sophisticated model of causation, that is, dependent arising. Things occur or do not occur based on the presence or absence of other things. Nothing is self-caused; nothing exists as an independent entity. Thus, the "Cartesian theater," in which we as subjects peer out at our world of objects, is a universally accepted—yet largely unconscious—way of describing our existence, whose operation long precedes the appearance of the philosopher Descartes. Such a model of existence is precluded from the perspective of dependent arising. Waldron takes this as a fundamental position of Buddhism, which is pervasive in the early texts. We form our world through our views and habits.

The second chapter is labeled "Cognitive Processes in Early Buddhism." Here we get a more detailed view as to how the self and its objects are formed. Where do "I" and "mine" come from? This chapter starts off with a refresher on the twelve limbs of dependent arising, from which it proceeds to explain the formation of a fictitious self and other, paying special attention to the powerful role that language plays in the process.

Chapter 3, "Abhidharma: Analyzing Our Minds," shows us the results of the energetic efforts made by early Abhidharma scholars to provide a definitive and detailed map of the mind and the path. Their effort is important because the terminology they created would end up becoming the basis for the Yogācāra path system. But the Abhidharma system has a stumbling block: in order to explain existence, the Abhidharmists analyzed the building blocks of phenomena into discrete units called "*dharma*s." Despite the general Buddhist principle that all things are impermanent, these dharmas were seen as being real entities, having their own distinctive natures. But if something has a distinctive nature, how can it be changed into something else? This negates the possibility of potentiality and growth. Thus the Abhidharma path contains logical glitches. This is a seminal issue that the later Yogācāra scholars would have to solve. Nonetheless, they benefited immensely from the construction of the complex Abhidharma system.

Chapter 4, "Early Mahāyāna: The Perfection of Wisdom and Nāgārjuna," is the final chapter of the pre-Yogācāra discussion. The perfection of wisdom (*prajñāpāramitā*) sutras mark a critical stage in the process of resolving the above Abhidharma problematic. This is due to the clever usage of the all-important concept of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) along with the application of the notion of "two truths"—ultimate and conventional. This allows the writers to deny the reality of something from the ultimate perspective but acknowledge that that thing is necessary for functionality from the conventional perspective. The *Diamond Sutra* has the famous line:

> What are called all dharmas are, in fact, not all dharmas.
> That is why they are called all dharmas. (p. 115)

Thus, the containment of essences by phenomenological components of our existence is rejected. Nonetheless, while a pencil is not really a pencil, when you need to write, you have to ask for a pencil.

The other major influence on the development of Yogācāra is the Madhyamaka tradition, generally assumed to have been founded by the great scholar-monk Nāgārjuna (ca. 2nd–3rd c.). It is Nāgārjuna who demonstrated how to navigate between the extremes of ultimate and conventional, existence and nonexistence, through the notion of "the middle way." This notion of middle way becomes central to the Yogācāra explication of reality. This ends the first part of the book.

Part 2 contains the explication of Yogācāra proper. This section starts off with chapter 5, "The *Saṃdhinirmocana Sutra*: Reframing Emptiness Cognitively." The *Saṃdhinirmocana Sutra* is the key scripture for the establishment of the Yogācāra system, containing a full account of the major Yogācāra systemic aspects. The founders of Yogācāra—the half-brothers Vasubandhu (fl. ca. 4th or 5th c.) and Asaṅga (ca. 320–ca. 390)—had become fascinated with examining the process of the transmission of causation and the matrix of dependent arising. One of the key concepts introduced in the *Saṃdhinirmocana* is that of the storehouse consciousness—the *ālayavijñāna*, which is considered to be the deepest layer of our consciousness, functioning at the unconscious level, carrying the causal grains of our existence (seeds and habit energies) and bringing them to fruition. As is explained in detail in chapter 6, since the storehouse consciousness is, like all other things, dependently arisen, there is no need to establish or defend an immutable essence. The mind is described as consisting of eight layers of consciousness, with the *ālayavijñāna* being the eighth and deepest.

Chapter 7 is titled "Mere Perception in Vasubandhu's *Twenty Verses*." This chapter takes up one of the thorniest issues (both in the past and present) in Yogācāra Buddhism—the meaning of "perception only." One of the common labels of the Yogācāra school is that of *vijñaptimātra*—rendered by Waldron as "mere perception." Does the Yogācāra description of reality as mere perception imply "idealism"? Or do "external objects" really exist? For Waldron, this is a moot question—one which only arises when the scholar is looking at dependent arising from an ontological perspective. If one is taking a proper Buddhist epistemological approach, everything is dependently arisen; therefore a reified, distinct subject or object cannot exist. This is no small matter, since what is being discussed here is the core nature of our very existence and the existence of all things. Therefore, although "the existence of external objects" is a topic that continues to raise its head within Yogācāra Buddhist discussions, Waldron's resolution of the issue is elegant and clear: like the rest of the problematic issues that arise in the course of this text, the issue is resolved once again through an examination of dependent arising in order to realize that this principle governs every single event in our conscious experience.

Chapter 8 is titled "Cutting through Appearances: Maitreya's *Distinguishing Phenomena from Their Ultimate Nature*." Here we have arrived at the discussion of the path—the way out of our self-made trap concerning our perception of objects and our entanglement in linguistic constructs. For this purpose, it is imperative that the practitioner fully develop "nonconceptual wisdom." A good deal of this chapter is devoted to explaining the meaning of this notion. This is important because the expression "nonconceptual" is often taken to refer to a state of stupid blankness. Rather, this is a kind of untrammeled, pristine, penetrating wisdom that is not bogged down by personally or culturally created perceptions. The creation of this kind of wisdom is the only way to cut through the web of *vijñapti*, in which we are deeply entangled. This chapter

relies on the reading of a text called the *Dharmadharmatāvibhāga*, which contains a concise description of the methods to approach the sundering of all dualistic-based approaches. The key meditative process for the attainment of nonconceptual wisdom is given on page 292:

1. Practicing with a focal object
2. Practicing without a focal object
3. Practicing non-focusing on a focal object
4. Practicing focusing on non-focusing

Making Sense of Mind Only is a very well-written book. Having taught university courses in Japan for the past thirty years, when I have taught Yogācāra to Japanese students, there were more than ten introductory books on "mind only" that I could choose from. These are all good books written by good scholars. Most of them followed a similar pattern—that of elucidating the arguments of a notable Yogācāra text. Most authors of these books felt compelled to provide detailed lists of all of the mental factors and components of the Yogācāra path, but such detail can be overwhelming for the beginner student. Waldron's book stays focused on the main arguments. Rather than grinding us through detailed lists of mental factors, the book sticks with fleshing out the core components that form conscious and unconscious experience through a careful reading of essential texts. The discussion is enhanced by the fact that the author is deeply steeped in the findings of modern psychologists, philosophers, and cognitive scientists, whose recent understandings of the function of consciousness are remarkably similar to those of fifth-century Indian Buddhists. It is a superb work, which I am looking forward to using the next time I teach Yogācāra to a university class.

REFERENCE

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Esoteric Pure Land Buddhism. By Aaron P. Proffitt. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2023. xx + 468 pages. Hardcover. ISBN-13: 978-0-8248-9361-3.

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The volume under review is a groundbreaking study that forces us to radically modify how we understand the relationship between Pure Land Buddhism and esoteric